

Returning to your Roots: Use of Mobile Shooting in an Ethnomediaology case study with the Tejon Native American Tribe in California

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In 2018 and 2019, StoryLab (Skills Training for Democratised Film Industries) organised two trips to the Wind Wolves Preserve in Bakersfield, California. The coordinator of both trips was Prof. Erik Knudsen, the founder of StoryLab and ethnomediaology methodology and I was the principal investigator of these trips. Ethnomediaology is an interdisciplinary approach inspired by practices in ethnomusicology and autoethnography. Ethnomediaology involves the active and immersive participation of researchers in a research culture and its processes, using this profound personal engagement as a basis for knowledge generation, data gathering and evaluation.¹

The use of mobile phones was highly significant to these specific workshops since they were the essential tool that enabled participants to shoot their final films. Also of note is the fact that it was the first time that StoryLab participants had used mobile phones so extensively to film their final stories. StoryLab workshops are based on ideation techniques and the creation of stories. During the above workshops we decided to create a final form of these stories and the use of mobile phones proved invaluable in the process and gave the opportunity to participants to continue using the mobile phones for filmmaking even after the duration of the workshops.

This paper uses this case study and my personal perspective to demonstrate the way that ethnomediaology can offer solutions to local communities and participants who want to share their own stories. The significance of this case study is demonstrated by the final products and the impact interviews of the participants, as well as the process of brainstorming and evidence gathered in the workshops.

During the workshops, I was Professor Knudsen's PhD student. Working with a Native American community was something that I did not believe I would ever have the chance to experience. In order to deliver a series of ethnomediaological workshops to Tejon Native American tribe members, Prof Knudsen collaborated with Dr David Robinson on his AHRC-funded Unravelling the Gordian Knot Project – an international archaeological project aimed at understanding Native Californian rock paintings² and basketry³, and also involving innovative collaborative work with Native Americans in the creation of virtual reality platforms⁴ alongside the University of Central Lancashire.⁵

Focusing primarily on ideation practices, these workshops facilitated new co-development and production partnerships while enhancing their participants' visual storytelling skills. The results included: increased engagement with local cultural preservation, deepened awareness of the opportunities of narrative filmmaking, and bolstered voices for these independent and marginalised communities. The Native Americans wanted to find a way to share their stories, background and heritage throughout the community and especially with the younger members. The elders of the tribe felt that the younger members needed a way to feel more connected with their stories and also to enable a means of transgenerational communication in the tribe.

The reason for these California StoryLab trips was to help Dr David Robinson and his team of archaeologists to develop ways of connecting contemporary Tejon tribe members with their heritage by exploring their relationship with the land inhabited by their ancestors and archaeological findings within it. Through recent work with Dr Robinson's team and the Wind Wolves Preserve management, tribal members have been relearning their languages while becoming more familiar with archaeological findings discovered on the Preserve. We were able to work together with the Native American community to explore practical ways of

shaping their ideas into stories. Specifically, they were encouraged to develop their own voice, both individually and as a community, by making films using their mobile phones.

Since we decided that during these workshops the participants would create a final form of their stories, the use of mobile phones played an essential role in that. We wanted them to use a device that they would be able to use after we left California. In this way we would be able to achieve the goal of this research. Additionally, the use of mobile phones as film devices reinforces the basic principle of StoryLab, namely film democratisation.⁶

During the workshops, the Tejon Native American community was able not only to find new ways of expressing its heritage and history, through storytelling and filmmaking, but also to come together as a family. In the constantly developing world we are living in the workshops provided a means through which Native American elders could pass on their knowledge and heritage to the younger members of their family.

First field trip to the Wind Wolves Preserve, 2018

During the summer of 2017, Prof. Knudsen visited the Wind Wolves Preserve to meet with the Tejon Native American tribe and get a first impression of the archaeological fieldwork being undertaken there. The Native Americans did not have a strong involvement with the excavations and were not participating in this archaeological work taking place in the land of their ancestors. Our aim was to find ways to engage them with the research and the findings in the land. Prof. Knudsen discussed this with me, and we decided to run a StoryLab workshop in 2018 with participants from the tribe, both young and old, which would be centred upon ideation techniques and the potential creation of a short film.

My first field trip to the breath-taking Wind Wolves Preserve in Bakersfield, California was during the summer of 2018. I camped there for a month with the archaeological team. The main goal of this trip for me, as part of StoryLab, was to organise a series of workshops with

the Tejon Native American community and for us to work together, utilising ethnomediaology, on the creation of their own films, telling their personal stories. When I arrived at the location and met with some of the Tejon tribe members for the first time, I realised the significance of this land – not only for the Native Americans but also for the two other groups that, at this particular moment, shared the same space. The Wind Wolves Preserve exists on Native American land and is now administered by The Wildlands Conservancy, a non-profit organisation that restores and preserves nature and provides free environmental education programmes. Concurrently, with the co-operation of the Conservancy and the Tejon community, a team of archaeology students from the University of Central Lancashire were excavating and camping on the same land. Consequently, I realised that this was a unique opportunity not only to work together with the Native American community but also to compare data with and understand the different perspectives of the three different focus groups that were then sharing this privileged space.

The workshop was divided into four sessions, all under the topic “Landscape”, and the three different focus groups attended it separately (Tejon Native Americans, rangers, and archaeology students).⁷ Despite sharing a theme, the three focus groups approached “Landscape” from completely different paths. The participants from the Native American group created a story about their ancestors on their ancestral land and how they used trading routes on the river (Fig. 1). The rangers approached the topic through issues of environmental protection, and the archaeology students created a comedic story about this location.⁸ Brainstorming was part of the creative process and we also recorded the sessions.⁹



Figure 1: A story-creation workshop.

The data collected from the groups compelled me to search more deeply and to attempt to understand the profound connection of the participants to the land. So, I decided to create some semi-structured interviews with most of the focus group members, in the hope of understanding how they felt about their connection with the land and their experience at this specific time in the Wind Wolves Preserve. The interviews were truly enlightening, showing a deep correspondence with their choices during the first workshop and the stories they created. Interviews were filmed with the respective participants: the archaeology students,¹⁰ the rangers,¹¹ and Sandra Hernandez (Treasurer of the Tejon Native American tribe).¹² Through their interviews I had a better idea of how each group connected with this particular landscape. I also came to better understand the relationship and the bonds between the groups. As an outsider, newly arrived in this land, it was extremely important for me to understand these connections. StoryLab believes that stories and filmmaking are not only for production

companies and big corporations but for everyone. In one of her poems, Muriel Rukeyser says that: “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms”.¹³ Storytelling is one of the basic elements of human nature, and everyone has their own stories to tell.

StoryLab’s three basic core values are “Integrity, Authenticity and Openness”. Integrity refers to the fact that the training schemes are mentor-based and that the equality of the relationship between mentor and mentees, professionals and communities, researchers and participants, is an integral part of the nature of the discussion and collaborative engagements. Authenticity indicates a commitment to anchoring story development in the feelings, emotions, intuitions, aspirations, dreams, memories and needs of the individual participants in workshops. No agendas and expectations are set by outside agents, and all stories developed are closely aligned with these core attributes. Openness signifies the nature of the working space, in which professionals, researchers, mentors, participants, mentees and communities engage with the practical processes of story development. This is an open “clean slate” working space, in which participants produce fresh, original ideation, rather than developing pre-defined narratives or previously ideated projects.¹⁴ Through our ideation techniques, we create an environment in which the participants can have their own original, authentic voice without recourse to any previous expectations and agendas. As mentors, we also participate in the learning process, as we acquire knowledge from the participants.

Mobile shooting in the creation of their personal voice

The creation of form is a way through which we become conscious of our reality.¹⁵

Knudsen elaborates:

Being attached to a form can be a serious problem for a creator. While we can love and enjoy our craft and the tangible outcomes we create with this craft, what happens if that craft is suddenly removed from us as a possibility, or what happens when what we have created is destroyed, decays or is reshaped by others or unforeseen circumstances?¹⁶

Thus, form is not as important as ideas and stories. Form can change under specific circumstances but ideas and stories persist, regardless of the form used. For StoryLab, the most important tool is the ideation process facilitated by our open approach. For these workshops, we decided to create final film pieces in order for the teams to share the outcomes of their experience with the environment (friends, tribal members, co-workers etc.) and also to explore in more depth the final outcomes of these workshops.

Using mobile phones as shooting devices was essential for the creation of their final form. We wanted to work with a device that was easy for them to use and that they would be able to continue to use for filmmaking purposes after the workshops were completed. If we had used professional cameras for the workshop, the participants would not have been able to use their new skills after its conclusion.

I believe that the use of mobile phones also connects with one of the primary ideas of StoryLab: everyone has a story to tell. Mobile phones enabled them not only to tell their story but also to create a finished product that they would be able to share with everyone. For me as an independent filmmaker it was essential to use a recording device that was easily accessible to them and free to use. I believe that the use of mobile phones to shoot films brings us closer to the vision of the Camera Stylo movement which is that one day, no matter their access to resources, everyone will have the opportunity to create films.¹⁷ During the third session, we offered technical training which focused on using mobile phones to shoot their stories (fig. 2).



Figure 2: Technical Training

The participants were fascinated by the ways in which they could use their mobile phones to create their own stories and share their vision with the rest of the world. Freely available software allowed them to shoot with their mobiles and edit their final films with their laptops.

Final Outcomes and Impact of 2018 workshop

The final outcomes of the 2018 workshop were three different short films, one from each group, shot exclusively using mobile phones.¹⁸ The Native Americans decided to create an experimental film called *Returning to Our Roots*. This experimental video explores the connection of the Native American community with this particular landscape as being the land of their ancestors. It shows three young princesses of the tribe returning to their sacred land and dancing their traditional dance wearing their native costumes. In the background we can hear an old traditional song of the tribe called “Coyotes' song”, and at some point, three

coyotes, animals held as extremely sacred by the Tejon, come closer to the dance.¹⁹ The group of rangers created a short documentary called *A Life of a Naturalist*, which depicts a working day in a ranger's life and all the issues that arise in the course of it. It is a tribute to their love of the land and the importance of their job, regardless of the cost or the intensity of their work. The last group – the archaeology students from UCLan – created a short documentary entitled *Digging Deep*, which delves into the background and motivations of Devlin Gandy (one of the archaeological dig supervisors), while explaining the importance of the landscape in the Native American past.

All the above films provided the groups with the opportunity to share their stories and their perspectives about the land and their role in it. The use of phone cameras as recording devices provided the participants with a unique element to create their films. In the film *A Life of a Naturalist* the use of mobile phone cameras was essential since the whole story consisted of following a ranger during one of her workdays on the Preserve. Filming with a mobile phone provided the necessary style to feel as if we are actually following her throughout one of her work days. Furthermore, in the rest of the films, shooting with mobile phones provided participants with the necessary freedom to create their films during their day, without having to worry about heavy equipment and how to use complex cameras. The Native Americans described the whole process as a fun activity they engaged in together as a family. In this manner I created an open environment for them to share their stories without any specific models or industry expectations. During this process, I was also able to discover important elements for my work as a filmmaker and learn in the same open environment as the participants. The impression our session left on the participants is clearly shown in the impact videos taken after their conclusion.²⁰

Six months impact with the Native American group

Six months after StoryLab's workshop on the Wind Wolves Preserve, I organised a semi-structured interview with Sandra Hernandez to discuss its impact in her community.²¹ The impact of this interview was extremely important. Sandra explained that the participants from the tribe felt more secure about sharing their stories and more confident about expressing their thoughts and personal perspectives. These very positive findings provided the opportunity to suggest a second workshop, to be held in 2019. On this occasion, it would focus on intergenerational communication within the tribe and, specifically, ways for the whole tribe to work together to produce a story that they could share in their community.

Second field trip to the Wind Wolves Preserve, 2019

On the second field trip, we took a slightly different approach. Our focus this time was on the Native American community, and we wanted to have only one film as an outcome. This was to be created through collaboration between the Tejon community and UCLan archaeology students and staff. We also wanted to focus on more advanced training, involving mobile shooting and D.I.Y. lighting, so we arranged a four-day workshop. The first day was for people from the tribe that did not participate in the 2018 workshops and the new archaeology students.²²

In the 2019 workshops the participants chose to work on the topic: "Myth, history, heritage." It was extremely interesting to observe the ideation session with completely different approaches from the 2018 workshops this time, all expressed on the same page to create one concrete, complete story.²³ Our decision to have a mixed group of tribe members and archaeologists proved fruitful, enabling us to observe the same story being approached from different points of view (Fig. 3) – one more scientific, and one more personal.²⁴



Figure 3: A mixed group of tribe members and archaeologists

Mobile shooting and D.I.Y. (Do-It-Yourself) techniques

As mentioned above, in 2019 we decided to focus on the intergenerational communication of the tribe. Since they wanted to create a final film that they could share with the whole tribe, we decided to organise training in more advanced mobile shooting and D.I.Y. lighting techniques. Our aim was to better support the technical quality of their final product. In the beginning, we approached the topic theoretically, thinking about the ways in which mobile shooting supports our vision for film democratisation. I analysed this topic with examples and practical advice during the first day of the workshop. We talked extensively about the vision of the Camera Stylo movement and the French New Wave. We also discussed filmmakers that use very light equipment to shoot their stories and how this choice gives them the freedom to work independently without the need of big production companies and tight

schedules. The Greek filmmaker Petros Sevastikoglou was also discussed, particularly the way he uses DSLR cameras to shoot feature films.²⁵

In addition, I connected the above examples and notions with StoryLab's vision for film democratisation and how I believe that the use of mobile phones contributes to creating a form to our stories and is a crucial tool for this vision. The same day, I organised an interactive workshop with screenings and discussions focusing on the power of stories in independent and mainstream cinema narration. On the second day of the workshop, we invited Petros Antoniadis, a professional Director of Photography based in Los Angeles, with whom I collaborated on the short films *Flickering Souls Set Alight* (2018)²⁶ and *Allimonò* (2019).²⁷ Petros worked closely with the participants and dedicated the second day to techniques that would enable them to use the sunlight or flashlights to create an interesting atmosphere for their film (Fig. 4). This workshop was extremely well received, especially by the older participants, who identified this as an area in which they required help.



Figure 4: Training in lighting techniques

Then, since memory plays a significant role in the narration of their story, we invited Prof. Katerina Zacharia from Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, to present her short documentary film *Blessings and Vows* (2018)²⁸ and to discuss the background research of this particular film. Prof. Zacharia also focused on the element of cultural identity and used Greece as an example of how we can represent this topic through our cinematic gaze.²⁹

During the final two days, the participants had to shoot and edit their final film using only their mobile phones, D.I.Y. lighting techniques and open-source editing software (Figs. 5, 6 and 7). In the semi-structured interviews that followed, the participants emphasised the value of the above workshops, asserting that the training in D.I.Y. techniques and the use of mobile phones as recording devices provided them with everyday tools to produce something necessary for their community.³⁰ The final film demonstrates a really important element and personal perspective of the tribe. The topic of the films is the ways that official history tries to overshadow their personal memory and heritage.³¹



Figure 5: Shooting on location



Figure 6: Shooting on location



Figure 7: Editing

Conclusions

Both of my field trips to the Wind Wolves Preserve were life-changing experiences that have shaped my perspective as a filmmaker and as a researcher. First of all, I found a spiritual aspect of myself that I never thought I would find. Observing the connection with the landscape and the way that nature played a crucial role in the Native Americans' everyday life completely changed my perspective on spirituality and the existence of something greater than us. This development is also represented in my later works as a filmmaker – that is, in my short film *Allimonò* (2019).³² The above data, collected over two years, demonstrates how ethnomediaology can serve as a significant tool for local communities, enabling them to discover their own personal voice through their stories and share their perspective with the world.

The open environment that we tried to create, and the notion of integrity between the participants, provided a unique space for them to tell their own authentic stories. The distinctive approach of ethnomediaology, and the notion that everyone has a story to tell, can provide a fresh perspective not only to filmmakers but also to local communities and people without any experience of filmmaking.

The use of mobile phones, D.I.Y. techniques and open-source software enabled the participants to give a form to their stories, making it easier for them to share their ideas and develop personal voices. Thus, the impact of the workshops is clear, with the participants having continued to use their mobiles to record their videos and personal stories even after the end of the project, something that would not be possible had we used professional cameras. The use of the above technology successfully facilitated intergenerational communication within the tribe. The elders were able to share their myths and heritage with the younger members, and the younger members were able to help the elders with the technology in order for them to create a form for their stories.

Through the data collected – the semi-structured interviews and the final films produced during both years – it is clear that ethnomediaology provided an environment in which the Tejon Native American tribe could come together as a family, discuss their past and their ideas, and to create a product that completely reflects their feelings and their perspective. These workshops also strengthened the bond between the tribe, the rangers and the archaeologists, creating an open environment for everyone to exchange their views and connect in pursuit of a common goal.³³

These workshops were also important for StoryLab itself, since we had the opportunity to test our methodology in a community without previous experience in filmmaking. This experience has opened new paths for us to expand StoryLab into different areas and communities. In doing so, we hope to find new ways for ethnomediaology to facilitate creative exploration of the participants' personal gaze through stories and films.

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Author Biography

Dr. Iakovos Panagopoulos is an award-winning Greek director and researcher, best known for his work *Flickering Souls Set Alight* (2019) and *Allimonò* (2020). Iakovos's pioneering work is a combination of practical filmmaking and academic research. His goal is to narrow the gap between the two. Iakovos's first degree in Audio Visual Arts at the Ionian University was followed by an M.A. in Cinematography at Bournemouth University. In 2019, he completed his Ph.D at the University of Central Lancashire. on the work of Theo Angelopoulos. Iakovos is currently teaching in Audio Visual Arts department of Ionian University. He also started his post-doctoral research in Panteion University of Social and Political Science with Prof. Seferiadis.